

## **Sexual and Gender Diversities – Implications for LGBTQ Studies**

**Abstract:** This think piece provides a critical analysis of the terms Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) from an international perspective that draws on citizenship studies, providing some indications of the implications for LGBTQ Studies. It outlines difficulties with the LGBTQ acronym in the Global North and South<sup>1</sup>. Internationally, scholarship to support the human rights of non-heterosexuals and gender-diverse people is badly needed, but the think piece concludes that it is crucial to consider the social context of different cases, and to address the materialist, cultural, neo-colonial and other forces that effect the formation of non-heterosexual and gender-diverse identities.

**Keywords:** Citizenship, sexual orientation, LGBTQ Studies, SOGIE, international

The last 25 years have seen a number of important developments regarding sexual and gender identities, and the socio-political context that shapes them. Transgender studies has emerged as a substantial scholarly field, and a plethora of gender variant identities are now evident. The diverse groups known as non-binary or gender-queer include ‘...people [who] have a gender which is neither male nor female and may identify as both male and female at one time, as different genders at different times, as no gender at all, or dispute the very idea of only two genders’ (Richards et al 2016: 95). Authors such as Monro (2005) argue that this gender pluralization has profound effects on the ontological foundations of sexual orientation. It means that male, female, and the lesbian/gay/heterosexual (LGH) categorizations that are built upon these identities are not discrete, and a range of other sexualities become apparent, for example sexual expressions between a non-binary person and a cisgender male. There are other important challenges to discrete notions of LGH, and indeed LGBTQ. In the Global

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<sup>1</sup> The umbrella term ‘the Global North’ includes USA, Canada, and Europe, and the umbrella term the ‘Global South’ refers to Africa, Australia, most of Asia, and many island nations. It is acknowledged that these terms are geographically imprecise.

South, identities exist that are forged differently to those generally interpreted as LGBTQ. Alternative means of conceptualizing gender and sexual diversity have evolved, including the term ‘Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Expression’ (SOGIE) (Koko et al forthcoming 2018), but these have not been properly integrated into scholarship about gender and sexuality internationally. Overall, more understanding of queerness in a global context is needed (see Wesling 2008).

This reflection piece discusses issues concerning the term ‘LGBTQ’ from a critical international perspective, using some concepts taken from citizenship studies. The field of LGBTQ studies is diverse and evolving, with a range of programmes in the USA and internationally, and a specific body of literature (see for example Alexander et al 2017). The emphasis on identity politics that characterized early Northern scholarship has continued, as reflected in the acronym ‘LGBTQ’. Claiming identities such as ‘gay’ can be a powerful basis for activism to effect social and cultural change, but at the same time this may lead to other groups or subjectivities being subsumed or overlooked (see Richardson and Monro 2012).

The creation of programs of study that address non-normative sexual and gender identities, including LGBTQ studies, is important for the production of intellectual and social resources that support diversity and tolerance. These programs serve as a locus for capacity-building amongst students and academics. Empirically-grounded knowledge, and theoretical analysis, can be used by educators, advocates, and others working to support the human rights of people with non-normative genders and sexualities. The field of LGBTQ and related studies will develop in an ongoing way given processes of globalization. For instance, Western-originated words are used in varied ways internationally; the notion of ‘queer’ has been criticized by some African scholars, who see it as a neo-imperial concept (see Nyanzi 2014) whilst other African scholars have embraced and worked with it (Matebeni 2014, Nyanzi

2014, see also Matebeni et al 2018). Academic knowledge production grounded in lived experience and activist knowledge (for example Monro 2015) can be seen as central to the development of LGBTQ studies internationally. Historically, the development and consolidation of gay and lesbian studies is linked with lesbian and gay rights movements (Wilton 1995); recently emerging areas of scholarship and activism regarding, for example, non-binary genders may become similarly important.

The following discussion begins by briefly outlining some concepts drawn from two areas of citizenship theory: universalism/particularist debates within sexual citizenship literatures (Monro and Richardson 2014, Monro 2015) and transnational citizenship (Ong 2005). It then analyzes issues concerning the term 'LGBTQ' in the Global North and South. The think piece concludes by indicating some implications for LGBTQ studies internationally. This short piece does not address intersex and variations of sex characteristics (see for example Kaggwa 2013, Monro et al 2017a); there is a strong need to develop Intersex Studies but that is beyond the scope of this piece.

### **Citizenship Studies**

Citizenship is a concept 'encapsulating the relationship between the individual, state and society' (Yuval-Davis 1997: 4). Sexual and intimate citizenship literature (for example Plummer 1995, Richardson 2000, 2017) is by now well-developed, and a smaller body of trans citizenship scholarship has also emerged (Monro 2000, 2003, 2005, Hines 2013, Monro and Van der Ros 2017, Kuhar et al 2017). Citizenship studies concerning sexual orientation and gender identities have historically been dominated by theories from the USA and Western Europe but can be applied internationally (see Richardson 2017).

Citizenship theory initially revolved around social, political and legal rights and responsibilities. Sexual citizenship theorists challenged this focus, looking at issues such as whether the engagement of LGBTQ activists with state institutions will result in challenges to the heterosexism of these, or conversely entail the assimilation of LGBTQ people into homonormative identities (see Monro and Richardson 2014). The universalism/particularist debate is one useful aspect of sexual and trans citizenship theories. Universalist approaches to citizenship include everyone and may seek to treat everyone the same in terms of rights and responsibilities. This is important for LGBTQ studies in a number of ways. 'LGBTQ' in its entirety, is universalist as it groups lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender people, and queers together, potentially implying that their concerns are shared. Such universalist approaches may inadvertently subsume or marginalize the specificities of individual or group experiences. For instance Monro et al (2017b) demonstrate the systematic erasure and/or marginalization of bisexuality in USA and UK sexualities scholarship over the 1975-2015 period, as lesbian, gay and queer studies were developed. In the Global South, Matebeni (2014) questions the exclusion of bisexual and transgender people in some South African contexts and points out that the term 'lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex' (LGBTI) and queer can hide diversities between groups of people.

In contrast to universalist approaches to citizenship, particularism deals with the concerns of specific groups, for example non-binary people. It is especially useful in addressing the concerns of less-visible groups. For example, research findings from an empirical study (Monro 2015) show support for bisexual-specific, or particularist, activist interventions to tackle biphobia. Research contributors explained why bisexual [and pansexual] people may have particular issues:

*If I have a partner of either biological sex, I might need a triple bed instead of a double bed...if I was dying in a hospice, who would be my next of kin? Both partners might equally be, but legally they can't be...most of us might not think about that because we are not in that situation (Meg-John in Monro 2015: 150)*

Particularist strategies to address the rights issues of people with non-normative genders and sexualities are evident internationally. For instance, in Bogotá the municipal government supported a multifaceted campaign by bisexual activists to raise awareness specifically about bisexuality and to tackle biphobia (Salazar and Galvis 2009). Overall, there is a need for both particularist and universalist approaches to LGBTQ citizenship.

Transnational citizenship studies form another resource that may be useful in exploring issues concerning the 'LGBTQ' acronym and LGBTQ studies. Initial notions of citizenship were rooted in ideas of belonging to a discrete nation-state. However, as theorist Ong explains, globalization is changing simplistic individual-nation state connections and is having a 'mutating' effect on citizenship (2005:697). Ong argues that the components of citizenship, such as rights and territoriality, are increasingly disarticulated. New political spaces are emerging, termed here 'assemblages' consisting of rights claims, mobilisations, discourses, interests, and resources. These are shaped by market forces, bureaucracy, and other concerns including both humanitarian ones and those associated with economic self-interest (see Studemeyer 2015). It is in this context that international LGBTQ and SOGIE organizing and scholarship takes place; it can be seen as a set of assemblages. There are specific, more particularist assemblages around LGBTQ issues as well as more general, universal ones; for instance transnational Queer of Colour organising (see Matebeni 2014).

Importantly, Ong's analysis of transnational citizenship accounts for both hyper growth (which could include, for example, a booming pink economy in certain cities, supported by a wealthy, internationally mobile queer elite) and what Ong terms 'zones of exclusion' (2005: 698). As Ong notes, political claims relating to exclusion focus not just on legal rights, but on survivability. SOGIE people's survivability can also be thought of using the term 'necropolitics'. Necropolitics concerns the ways in which some (queer) subjects are subject to quotidian processes of life-threatening violences; they are relegated – by the exercise of political and economic forces – to 'death zones' (Haritaworn et al 2014). This can be because of phenomena such as racism and gender binarism, as well as, for example, war or state persecution. The term 'necropolitics' helps to explain why some LGBTQ and other non-normative people thrive, whilst others perish; it fractures complacent notions of 'LGBTQ' and poses a more complex, contradictory reality.

A concern with survivability and necropolitics can be combined with particularist foci to inform LGBTQ studies. For instance, people who become forced migrants due to SOGIE concerns face particularly sharp survivability challenges (see Koko et al 2018). However, the lived experiences of LGBTQ forced migrants in, for example, Africa, are highly diverse and it is important not to frame particular groups in such a way as to encourage notions of victimhood. Queer migration scholarship forms a useful contribution to particularist approaches to sexualities/trans citizenship. It includes LGBTQ migrant activists and scholars directly confronting normative and exclusionary discourses of belonging (Chávez 2010).

Reflecting on Ong's (2005) assertion about the importance of market forces in shaping citizenships, it does appear that the material context is crucial to LGBTQ people's lives, wherever they are. Factors such as access to employment have a knock-on effect concerning LGBTQ people's abilities to travel, access safe accommodation, and take part in LGBTQ 'scenes' (Koko et al 2018). They interlink with other structuring factors such as space; those

LGBTQ people whose movements are restricted because of a lack of material resources – or other factors such as being very young, or ill – have vastly different experiences to wealthier LGBTQ people – even within a particular country such as the UK (see Monro 2010). In the Global South, material and spatial differences can also have a profound effect on the way that sexual and gender identities themselves are constructed. For example, Sinnott (2012) demonstrates that cultural processes of commodification and the market are strongly shaping emerging non-heterosexual identities in Thailand. In South Asia, ‘LGBTQ’ identification tends to be associated with being urban and middle or upper class, whilst other identities such as ‘Kothi’ are more prevalent amongst less wealthy and/or rural population (see Monro 2007, 2015). Hijras are strongly influenced by material and social structures, for example the Hijra in Bangladesh come largely from working-class backgrounds (Hossain 2012).

### **LGBTQ Categories in the Global North**

The terms encompassed within the ‘LGBTQ’ acronym are relatively recently evolved social constructions originating in the Global North. Each one of the ‘LGBTQ’ terms has been contested. For instance, for some lesbian feminists, lesbianism concerned political support for women and emotional connections with women as well as – or instead of – sexual expression between women. This extended to conscious development of lesbian studies as a means of staking out political territory (see Wilton 1995), and the territorial appropriation of female bisexuality by lesbian feminists such as Kitzinger who stated that:

Labels used to invalidate a woman’s lesbianism by indicating that she is not a ‘real’ lesbian include... ‘bisexual’...meaning that she is also attracted to men... this collection of invalidatory labels has the effect of severely reducing the number of ‘real’ lesbians in existence... (Kitzinger 1987: 67-68).

Other ‘border skirmishes’ continue to abound, for example debates about the meanings and level of inclusivity of the term ‘transgender’ (see Monro 2005). There is a problematic tendency for lesbians’ concerns to be less visible than those of gay men (Richardson and Monro 2012). In the UK bisexual community there are divergences about whether the terms ‘queer’ and/or ‘pansexual’ (attracted to people regardless of gender) or ‘omnisexual’ (attracted to varied types of people) are better terms than ‘bisexual’, especially given the plethora of gender identities now available (see Monro 2015). Meanwhile, a substantial proportion of the population internationally engage in same-sex sexual expressions without clearly relating to LGBTQ categories. For example, same-sex male sexual expression in UK saunas can take place with no verbal communication (see Monro 2015), and in the USA, being ‘on the Down Low’ involves publically identifying as heterosexual but being behaviourally bisexual (see Pettaway et al 2014).

Whilst the idea of ‘queer’ can be used to destabilize rigid sex/gender categorizations, debates about the meaning and utility of the term also exist. ‘Queer’, as readers will know, can be used as a verb (to mean challenging or destabilizing heteronormativity and/or gender binaries) and/or as a noun to mean non-heterosexual, non-gender binaried, or sometimes as a shorthand term for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender. The latter use can, again, become problematic, as certain groups may be overlooked (see Monro 2015). In addition, whilst ‘queer’ is useful internationally in providing a space or assemblage for non-normative sexual/gender organizing, it does not always resonate in some Global South countries, for instance Taiwan (Sinnott 2010). Therefore, tagging ‘queer’ onto ‘LGBT’ does not fully remedy the deficits associated with the acronym. The further addition of a ‘+’ onto the acronym, whilst demonstrating inclusivity, can also act to subsume or hide sexual and gender diversity if the different interests of the groups are not made explicit.

### **LGBTQ Categories and Non-Heterosexual Identities in the Global South**



Given the historically contingent, contested, and ultimately fictitious nature of the terms included in the 'LGBTQ' acronym it could seem rather surprising that they have taken hold internationally. This may be more to do with global inequalities, specifically South/North inequalities associated with the aftermath of colonialism and the power of globalized capitalism, than with the particular worthiness of the terms. Localized identities in, for instance, African countries, may contrast with those included in the 'LGBTQ' acronym. However, these local identities can themselves be contested and are under debate (Matebeni et al 2018).

The global spread of notions of LGBTQ identities and rights is in conflict with – and is fundamentally shaped by – globalized patterns of prejudice and persecution regarding SOGIE populations. Globalized homophobias, biphobias, and transphobias rest on colonial legacies in a great many countries. For example, efforts to secure safety, recognition and human rights by African LGBTQ people are undercut by the framing of homosexuality as 'unAfrican', largely as the result of the legal and religious assemblages associated with colonialism (see Reddy 2001, Matabeni 2014). Moreover, the imposition of LGBTQ typologies internationally, by activists or others, can have the unfortunate effect of reducing the possibilities for sexual/gender identification and expression (Sinnott 2010).

Sex/gender configurations are varied internationally, particularly in Asia, where a wide range of other forms of identity are apparent, some of which do not separate out gender and sexual identities in the way that is taken for granted in the Global North. In India, for instance, the category of 'Kothi' encompasses aspects of both gender and sexual variance (see Monro 2007) and in some instances terms such as 'gay' are used to refer to what, in the Global North, would be called 'transgender' (Sinnott 2010). Terms such as 'gay' are becoming more widely used, but this is not the case everywhere. For example, Jackson shows [in 2000] that 'Thai homoeroticisms are not converging towards Western models' (2010: 405). As Sinnott

contends, it is important not to assume that the West is the originator of terms regarding gender and sexual diversity. There is history of sex and gender pluralism in South Asia going back at least 4000 years, underpinned by ancient ontological systems and spiritual practices (see Monro 2007, Sinnott 2010). Given these genealogies concerning sexual and gender variance, and the problematic hegemonies associated with neo-colonialism and globalized capitalism, care is needed by scholars regarding the ways that LGBTQ terms are deployed.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

This short reflection piece has provided a critical analysis of the terms included in the acronym 'LGBTQ', addressing some of the associated elisions and limitations.

Internationally, the emergence of non-binary and other gender-diverse identities renders a discrete typology of homosexuality/heterosexuality defunct; other subjectivities exist that cannot be described as simply homosexual, heterosexual, or indeed bisexual. The piece addresses some of the tensions concerning the LGBTQ acronym in the Global North, and then draws on scholarship from the Global South to address the ways in which, internationally, LGBTQ terms are problematic but can also be used strategically by some Southern actors. There are other typologies available at regional and local levels, for instance South Asian Kothi and Hijra identities that configure gender and sexuality in a different, less separated, way than that found in the LGBTQ acronym (see Monro 2007, Hossain 2012).

The think piece shows that citizenship concepts are useful in addressing some of the key issues raised by [i] the pluralization of sexes and genders in the Global North and [ii] the formation of genders and sexualities in the Global South. These concerns revolve around the utility of LGBTQ sexual and gender identity categories; their continued relevance; their exclusions and elisions, and the existence of other schema for understanding gender and sexual diversities. It would appear that whilst universal approaches to LGBTQ citizenship

might be useful in some contexts, particularist forms of citizenship analysis are key in foregrounding the rights claims and concerns of specific groups. Transnational citizenship usefully addresses the way that globalization affects citizenship claims; notions of non-normative sexual and gender rights assemblages are highly pertinent to the future development of LGBTQ studies.

The application of the acronym 'LGBTQ' in a universalizing fashion is ultimately flawed, erasing as it does the highly complex and varied identity formations associated with sexual and gender variance internationally. LGBTQ Studies scholars and students, whilst perhaps retaining the name 'LGBTQ' for their field, can usefully address these variations, the social contexts in which they are forged, and the globalized power dynamics and interplay of assemblages – both those associated with tolerant and inclusive approaches to sexuality and gender, and those associated with bigotry and prejudice. One of the key problems with the ubiquitous use of the acronym 'LGBTQ' is that the forces that shape subjects' sexual and gender identities – heterosexism, gender binarism, homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, and sexism – affect everyone, albeit in different ways. For example, cisgender heterosexuals may experience their gender expressions being policed in a way that shapes them towards greater normativity. Locating sexual and gender non-normativity with individuals who identify as LGBTQ removes the responsibility, in effect, for tackling oppressive sexed/gendered norms from the majority of the population. This problem may also pertain to other terms, such as SOGIE. However, the term SOGIE has a broader remit than LGBTQ, and may be more useful for the field currently termed 'LGBTQ' than the LGBTQ acronym. Universal conceptualizations of sexuality and gender variance such as SOGIE have broad remits, for example shared concerns with people's erotic rights, and globalized prejudice. The term SOGIE encompasses 'LGBTQ' but as part of a wider, globalised schema that includes the many other identities that exist internationally.

This reflection piece suggests that LGBTQ scholarship needs to use the term ‘LGBTQ’ critically and in a contextualized fashion. Globalized power dynamics, as well as localized social contexts, require interrogation. There is also a need for more attention to the material forces shaping gender and sexual categories and subjectivities. This should, of course, take place alongside attention to gendered, racialized, and other inequalities. The existence – or absence – of human rights frameworks and mechanisms is also a key factor affecting the survivability of non-heterosexuals and gender variant people (see for example Matebeni et al 2018). In understanding issues pertaining to non-heterosexuals and gender-diverse people, the more inclusive acronym SOGIE may be useful, but what is really crucial is attention to social and political context, and forces such as prejudice, consumerism, nationalism and culture.

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